COUNT THE COST
Luke 14:25-33
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How sad to have been a prudent, cautious person in 1776 and to have missed the War for Independence. I was struck by that thought while reading a novel about the experiences of a young recruit from Philadelphia in General Washington's Army. The story was told in the first person, by an old man remembering how it was. With some young companions he had celebrated the Declaration of Independence for a day and a night in a series of Philadelphia taverns. When he awoke the next day he discovered that he had, sometime the day before, enlisted to go to war. It was a good story: it underscored the dubious potential of the Patriot cause - young men, ill trained, with no equipment to speak of, left to their own devices to find food, were trooped all over the Eastern seaboard to engage the pride of the British Empire, professional soldiers with crisp uniforms, flashing bayonets and an air of invincibility about them. Initial enlistments were for six months; six months of hunger, exhaustion, cold and a series of military disasters. Anyone who could count calculateed the cost and stayed out of it. After the battle of Trenton which was a Patriot victory, the hero of the book is free to go home to Philadelphia. As a matter of fact he has been thinking of little else. But then General Washington makes a personal appeal and says something about the larger cause of liberty and offers a bonus out of his own pocket. And against every dictate of common sense the young man reenlists, subsequently loses a leg but lives to see his nation born. The vast, overwhelming majority, of course, never lifted a finger for the cause, but watched anxiously and waited the outcome. How sad, I thought, to be an old man in 1820, and to know that one had missed one of the most important events in the history of the world. The risk of caution is that one will miss life.

One of the most engaging motion pictures in the past several decades was a little gem about a New York butcher by the name of Marty. You will recall, I am sure, the poignant scene in that movie which made it a classic. Marty telephones a friend to plan the evening's activities. "What do you want to do, Marty?" "I don't know; what do you want to do?" "I don't Marty, what do you want to do...etc., etc., ad infinitum." It becomes apparent that there is nothing to do, because Marty is not willing to take the risk of establishing new friendships. He has been hurt too much by the rejection of others. Then a young woman enters his life: he breaks out of the boring sameness of his existence and discovers a whole new world. But it's costly, and heartbreaking at times. Commitment, decision are the necessary prerequisites for the emergence of the person. Real life begins when Marty begins to take chances and extends himself in love to another human being.

Consider those two totally different illustrations and the common truth to which they point. Real life is the result of making decisions, establishing loyalties, taking risks. Real life is in the direction of spontaneity, involvement, passionate engagement - and not - in the direction of caution and prudence. Consider that and then think with me about one of the most enigmatic, perplexing passages in the entire Bible.

Jesus had enlisted Matthew by calling him away from the tax table. He recruited Peter and Andrew away from their fishing nets. He told a wealthy young man that if he wanted to find his salvation he would have to sell his possessions and follow along. He seems, that is, to have solicited immediate, spontaneous, almost cavalier decisions. But in the text this morning we encounter the precise opposite. Think again about the content of the text.

- He suggested, for openers, that a condition of discipleship was hatred for one's family.

- He told two stories about a man who couldn't finish the tower he was building because he ran out of money, and a king who calculated his odds against a superior enemy and sued for peace.

- He concluded by saying that would-be followers must renounce everything.

Staggering? Breathtaking? Infuriating? It is not, obviously, a favorite Mother's Day text. Whatever He meant we preachers ordinarily stay away from this one. One critic summarizes: Jesus is here "trampling under foot everything that is human - blood and love and country, despising all natural ties." (See G.A. Buttrick, The Parables, p.79). The text lends itself to the sick fanaticism of groups such as the Children of God who have insisted on taking literally the business about hating mother, father, brothers and sisters.

Some light may be shed by the situation. Jesus and His small company were on the road to Jerusalem and great crowds were following along. Who were those crowds? A cross section of Galilee I suppose. There were patriots in the multitude who thought they were following a revolutionary into battle. There were devout literalists who expected Jesus to assume the Messianic throne of David when He arrived in the city. There were curiosity seekers; many people following simply because there was a parade to follow. But He knew what He was doing. It was not the prelude to coronation, but crucifixion. And somehow He had to tell them that. The costs of being in the parade were about to escalate dramatically and dangerously.

He chose idiomatic language to tell them. In ancient Hebrew love and hate when used together, become an idiom used to dramatize. The Talmud, for instance, comments on handsome Rabbis, "If they hated their beauty they would be more learned." (The Mission and Message of Jesus, Major, Manson and Wright, p.423). William Barclay observes that "Eastern language is always as vivid as the human mind can make it." (Daily Study Bible, Luke p. 203), and that His fisherman friends knew exactly what He meant even if we don't. He did not mean that Christians must hate their relatives. He used a Hebrew idiom - a dramatic paradox - to indicate that commitment to Him must be unswerving, total and without reservation. He taught them to love their enemies: He loved and cared for His own mother. He told His friends to love one another. In the stories which follow He was not advising caution so much as setting out the cost of the venture. It was no casual project they were about. Discipleship would not be for the timid.

Our history has taught the lesson well. We were born in bloody persecution. Our family roots include countless men and women who were executed for their faith. And today it is still the custom in some Moslem lands for a mother and father to carry a coffin through the village in a mock funeral procession when a son or daughter becomes a Christian.

We know in our own experience, the pure pain generated by conflicting loyalties: between racial justice and quality education, for instance: or equal opportunity for all and the best opportunity for ours. We watched the pain of a President last Wednesday torn by commitments to a friend and larger responsibility. We know exactly what John Galsworthy meant when he wrote, "Prejudices - or are they loyalties - I don't know - criss-cross - we all cut each other's throats from the best of motives." (Buttrick, op cit. p. 80).

Jesus did not mean to discourage anyone. We simply cannot conclude that He wanted men and women to watch and wait before deciding to follow. He meant honestly to describe the cost. And every time He added the ledger it came out unswerving, primary, total commitment. There was no other way. He was asking for that once-in-a-life commitment which transcends all other commitments; a loyalty that suddenly judges all other loyalties. He was calling them to make the most important decision of their lives. And He chose His words carefully to call that kind of commitment out of them.

It is no secret that small causes elicit small commitment: that football coaches win games by asking total commitment: you could not watch the drama in Ohio Stadium yesterday without sensing that both coaches were calling something out of their players far beyond what the young men thought they were capable of delivering. King Arthur demanded so much of his Knights, according to Tennyson, "that they were dazed as if half blind at the coming of the light." Patrick Henry would be long forgotten had he volunteered to work a little harder rather than invite death if not liberty: Winston Churchill well may have saved a nation by inviting ultimate sacrifice in the memorable phrase, "blood, sweat and tears."

So Jesus - whose goal it was to express the cosmic truth that God reigned on earth and to call a radical new being out of individual men and women, did not ask for a little more effort, a little more time or money, a little more agreement to philosophic principles. He asked them to renounce all else.

If you have ever thought honestly about the Gospel of Jesus Christ, you have been made uncomfortable by that. No one ever struggled more valiantly and thoughtfully with it than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. His loyalty to Christ led to imprisonment and execution by the Nazis. But long before, he had written a book, The Cost Of Discipleship, in which he identified cheap grace as the fatal heresy of modern Christianity. If it's cheap it's not the real thing and the only person who is cheated by what seems to be easy religion is the would-be disciple. Bonhoeffer labored over Christ's uncompromising demand. Listen to his struggle: "What is this power which so angrily comes between a man and the natural life in which it had pleased God to place him? Surely such a break is surly contempt for the good gifts of God." The reader can almost feel the dramatic conflict between this gentle pastor's loyalties to family, nation, profession and the good life and the demand of Jesus Christ which was about to be tested by the ominous sounds of Nazi totalitarianism. But, then, in the same paragraph he wrote down the intriguing and winsome truth of the Gospel, "...the barrier is no contempt for life...it is the life that is life indeed, the gospel, the person of Jesus Christ." (The Cost of Discipleship, p. 84).

Bonhoeffer understood that Christ does not ask us to hate our dear ones. He saw, however, that when any man or woman hears the call of Jesus Christ he or she must respond alone. He regarded it as the highest, noblest expression of human personhood when the individual self confronts Jesus Christ and commits everything to Him. Christ demands it: but so, Bonhoeffer suggested, does our integrity, our selfhood, our individuality as free men and women. It is in ultimate commitment to Jesus Christ that we are fully human.

Before we back away from the white hot intensity of that, however, let's come at it from another direction. Let's approach on the road of our needs as persons. I continue to be fascinated by the insights of Rollo May, psychiatrist, philosopher, author and articulate analyst of modern life. In Love and Will, May suggests that the rampant sickness among us is apathy. We feel ourselves the

victims of fate, we have become cynical because the issues which determine our existence are so large and grand that the individual simply bobs along like a cork in the ocean. We have become spectators rather than participants. Or in the more blunt words of a professor who once saw more in me than I was willing to see: "For God's sake, Mr. Buchanan, don't spend your whole life sitting on the curb watching the parade go by."

The current Rollo May book which has my mind engaged is a small one: The Courage to Create. Having wrestled with Bonhoeffer and the hard demand of Christ, try this: "An assertion of the self, a commitment, is essential if the self is to have any reality. This is the distinction between human beings and the rest of nature. The acorn becomes an oak by means of automatic growth; no commitment is necessary. The kitten similarly becomes a cat on the basis of instinct...But a man or woman becomes fully human only by his or her choices and his or her commitment to them." (p.5)

When we think about the uncompromising demand of Christ we are approaching something vital about our identity as persons. And when we find ourselves repelled by His insistance that we stand as individuals alone and either accept or reject His Lordship we may be, in fact, repelled by the risks of making any commitment to any person or any cause. We may be, that is to say, afraid to be fully human, to be who we are, to become fully men and women through decision.

The brightest examples of full and courageous humanity are those people who have found fortitude within themselves to take a lonely, individual stand against forces much more powerful than themselves. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, for instance, the crusty Russian poet who simply would not bend before the assembled might of the Soviet Secret Police. In spite of torture and the more subtle pressure of loyalty to his beloved Russia, Solzhenitsyn continued to cry out against the crushing of persons. On one occasion he was stripped naked and marched before a firing squad and the ritual was completed all the way to the end: but the guards fired blanks and then laughed at his fear. But he would not back away from his loyalty to humanity and truth which was, in fact, the assertion of his own humanity against dehumanizing oppression of Communism. Totalitarianism never gets along very well with human integrity. Other examples come to mind: Sir Thomas More in Robert Bolt's superb play, A Man For All Seasons, who literally lost everything because of his commitment to his own conscience.

But perhaps the more pertinent arena for this disucssion is closer to home: in the matter of personal relationships, for instance. Rollo May suggests that relationships require courage - "the courage to relate to other human beings, the capacity to risk one's self in the hope of achieving meaningful intimacy. Is is the courage to invest oneself over a period of time in a relationship that will demand an increasing oepnness." (Ibid, p.9).

May I suggest that if we have trouble with relationships it is because a good one is risky business? We may change. If we really are open to another we may find our assumptions, ideas, prejudices, challenged. It may cost us our pride, our precious egotism. We may find that a good relationship forces us to become another person, to grow, to become something new. How simple it is to keep other people at arm's length: to avoid the cost of changing by shutting out the other at the deep levels. How easy, according to the author, between men and women, to shift the issue to the body because we can't work up the courage which real intimacy requires. "It is easier in our society," he writes, "to be naked physically than

to be naked psychologically or spiritually..." (Ibid, p.10).

The particular relationship which causes us the most consternation is marriage - because it is the most costly. Perhaps that is why the institution seems to be shaky in our day. People don't want to pay the price in decision, total commitment. "I take thee to be my wedded husband or wife, and I do promise and covenant before God and these witnesses; to be thy loving and faithful wife or husband; in plenty and in want; in joy and in sorrow; in sickness and in health; as long as we both shall live." That is the cost of the relationship: to be loving and faithful in all seasons. When a man or woman stops paying the cost, or forgets that there is a cost, intimacy disappears, distances widen, affection dims and something precious dies. Again, Rollo May says it well: 'The essence of being human is that, in the brief moment we exist on this spinning planet, we can love some persons and some things, in spite of the fact that time and death will claim us all."(Ibid p.19)

The almost irresistable temptation in the Church is to soften the demand of Jesus Christ: to make it as easy as possible to join up and remain a member in good standing. Jesus asks us to pick up a cross and follow and somehow, after we filter that through the necessities of institutional life it comes out rather pathetically: "please come to church on occasion and give a few dollars."

But the issue here is not the institutional church: it is not even Jesus: it is you and me and our humanity. In the parables of our Lord the alternative to commitment is no building - or a poor compromise, in fact a surrender. The issue of the Gospel is life, real life: it is our need, not God's, that the Gospel addresses. We believe that in Jesus Christ God has shown that He wants us. But the need is on our side - our need to be fully human.

The invitation to discipleship is for everyone. The cost is that we must decide: we must willfully submit to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, or else we must back away from it quietly. We must accept His Lordship in between ourselves and others, ourselves and things, in His terms "renouncing everything".

But He gives it all back: the people, the dear ones - the mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, children, and the goods, the good things of earth to be used and enjoyed. But they are all different because now He stands in the midst of them.

The invitation is for everyone. The cost is dear - the promise is life.

Amen.

Father, give us the courage to be fully human: to be decisive men and women; to accept the Lordship of Christ and to follow where He leads.

Amen.